

# *New Haven Public Schools*

March 9, 2009

## **TESTIMONY BEFORE THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE ON VARIOUS BILLS**

Senator Gaffey, Rep. Fleischmann, Members of the Education Committee, my name is Susan Weisselberg, speaking on behalf of New Haven Superintendent of Schools Dr. Reginald Mayo concerning a number of bills before you today.

In brief, we support House Bill No. 6571, AAC Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Issues in Connecticut.

We have concerns about Senate Bill No. 944, AAC a Plan for Academic and Personal Success for Every Middle and High School Student, House Bill No. 6565, AAC Humane Education, House Bill No. 6567, AAC Readmission of Students, House Bill No. 6569, AAC Reporting of School Graduation Rates, and the Governor's Bill, No. 830, AAC the Governor's Recommendations Regarding Education.

### **Of the bills we support:**

- **House Bill No. 6571**, AAC Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Issues in Connecticut. This makes sense and would be helpful for us as well as other school districts. In fact, we would suggest referring the proposals in House Bill No. 6565, AAC Humane Education, to the Connecticut Academy for Education in Mathematics, Science and Technology.

### **Of the bills where we have concerns:**

- **Senate Bill No. 944**, AAC a Plan for Academic and Personal Success for Every Middle and High School Student: New Haven Public Schools supports the efforts to modify and reform secondary schools, especially to improve graduation rates and ensure the academic and personal success of every student. Nonetheless, we are concerned that this plan contains several unfunded mandates that would be difficult to implement at the district level that would meet that goal:
  - 1) An education preparing students for the 21st century should include the mandated study of world language, which is not included in the plan;
  - 2) We support the increased requirements for mathematics and science courses, but have concerns about some of the specific courses required:
    - Algebra II for every student, and an end of course exam;
    - We support Biology as a required course, but have concerns.

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about using this as the basis for an end of course exam. Chemistry is an important course for all students to take, and may be more appropriate. There also needs to be flexibility to allow schools that offer a high quality specialized science program, such as our magnet Sound School, and other vo-ag schools.

With additional science and technology courses, the State will need to examine certification to make sure that those teachers are available as this has historically been a shortage area.

With additional science and technology courses, there will need to be additional funding to purchase equipment and labs.

- 3) Of great concern is the plan to keep the CAPT test in the middle of 10th grade in Science, Math, Reading and Writing, and also to test those subjects with end of course exams, some of which would typically be given in the same year (Biology, Geometry, English II). There needs to be specification that the end of course exam and model curriculum match the performance standards of the curriculum for the CAPT test, and, if possible, students should not be required to take two high stakes tests in the same year.
  - 4) To ensure that all students have detailed individualized plans will requirement an investment in retraining and hiring pupil specialists, such as guidance counselors, especjally in the middle school.
- **House Bill No. 6565, AAC Humane Education.** Unlike some other added curriculum proposals, at least this one is linked to the availability of third party funding. We already have a district policy allowing opt out for general courses like Biology, but for Anatomy we state that it is a fundamental part of the course in the description. Therefore, if a high school student signs up for the course it is a problem to then later allow the student to opt out. Most of our aquaculture school courses in that subject area do involve animal experimentation, which are again fundamental to the courses. Given our concerns, we would suggest referring this proposal to the Connecticut Academy for Education in Mathematics, Science and Technology for further examination of these issues.
  - **House Bill No. 6567, AAC Readmission of Students,** has the admirable goal of readmitting a pupil to the pupil's original school after participation in an alternative educational opportunity in lieu of expulsion, and specifies that a district cannot expel the pupil for conduct which resulted in the pupil's participation in the alternative educational opportunity. We have several questions and concerns regarding the implementation of the bill that may require some clarification in its language.
    - 1) The bill should provide an opportunity for a school district to review the success of the alternative educational opportunity. Would the school district have the ability to review and recommend additional options, such as a different alternative educational opportunity, a transitional placement, or even expulsion if the student has not taken the first alternative placement seriously in terms of attendance and participation?
    - 2) Also, there is the implication of another unfunded mandate to provide programs at a school district's expense in addition to homebound instruction that provides for educational opportunities in lieu of expulsion.

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- **House Bill No. 6569**, AAC Reporting of School Graduation Rates, has the admirable goals of changing the age of consent for student withdrawal from school, development of a standardized dropout formula that accounts for adult education, and maintaining an alternative school or regional alternative school opportunities if the district's dropout rate exceeds 10%, and developing a plan following through high school for students identified in eighth grade as at risk of dropping out. We have several questions and concerns regarding the implementation of the bill that may require some clarification in its language.
  - 1) As regards Section 2 of the bill, we agree that adult education diplomas should be counted in a school district's graduation rate since those students receiving the diplomas have completed school. However, we suggest that students enrolled and participating in adult education diploma programs not be considered dropouts since they are attending school. We also suggest that students enrolled and participating in a GED program not be considered dropouts since they are attending an educational program (even though it is different from the diploma program).
  - 2) As regards Section 3 of the bill, we already provide a number of alternative school opportunities in New Haven. However, there is no definition of alternative school opportunities or of regional alternative schools. It is not clear what happens if a student rejects local alternative school opportunities and wants to attend a regional alternative school but the school district has no funding for that regional alternative school. Therefore, this bill could have a substantial fiscal impact, not only for us, but for other communities. It appears that both are thus unfunded mandates for a school district.
- **Bill No. 830**, AAC the Governor's Recommendations Regarding Education: We testified before the Appropriations Committee on February 11, 2009 concerning the impact of the Governor's budget proposals on education in New Haven. We have a series of concerns, including potential changes in interdistrict magnet schools' funding and construction and the reduction in reimbursements to food services, which would cost us a minimum of \$140,000 at a time when our meals may be a child's only healthy and substantial meals for the day.

We appreciate efforts to keep ECS intact while the State and every municipality face this fiscal predicament. Our challenges are great and, in New Haven, we believe your money has been well spent. We have had major gains in State mastery test scores across the board at all levels, including many double digit increases at many schools. These gains continue the momentum and steady gains across the district. Last February our Cambridge Evaluation Report highlighted many areas of achievement and solid structures within the Board of Education, noting New Haven as a model among Urban School Districts in Connecticut; we continue to work with the State and others on our District Plan of Improvement.

Our school district's improvements are team efforts, for frequent student data assessments, academic interventions, curriculum development and implementation,

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professional development, tutoring, and classroom improvements. Our scores have improved. In December, two New Haven high schools were among just 16 high schools across Connecticut that were awarded US News & World Report's Silver designation, and one New Haven high school was among the five awarded a Bronze designation; all three are interdistrict magnet schools. And, John C. Daniels School of International Communication has been awarded the status of 2009 Magnet School of Excellence by Magnet Schools of America, which selects 75 magnet schools in the nation for this top category.

New Haven is known for its schools of choice. We are proud of our interdistrict magnet school program, which engages students based on the themes of each school – and with the strong learning base these schools provide.

- The Governor's bill proposes flat funding for ECS and interdistrict magnet schools. Given the cost increases faced by local school districts, flat funding is certainly a challenge and results in service impacts to students. Certainly maintaining the interdistrict magnet school funding level increases for FY 10 (\$7,440) and FY11 (\$8,158) established by Public Act 07-3 helps to maintain the high level of quality established in these schools and to protect the State's effort to provide students with high quality diverse learning environments throughout the entire State of Connecticut. These increases represent the third and fourth year of a four-year phased-in increase that follow a ten-year period where the State did not increase its support to Host or locally operated magnet schools. We would ask that at a minimum the amount we receive for out of district students attending our interdistrict magnet schools not be cut.
- We ask that you eliminate the 25% ECS count reduction to local school districts that have students attending interdistrict magnet schools. This reduction, if implemented, could increase the tuition burden to local school districts by approximately fifty million dollars (\$50,000,000) statewide for the 2009-2010 school year. It would also effectively eliminate the Host model magnet school agreements that have effectively operated across the State for 15 years without the necessity of supplemental funding requests to the legislature.
- Section 14 contains a similar provision to that in SB 946, heard by the Education Committee on February 23, 2009. It states that applications for school construction projects for "new" interdistrict magnet schools would not be accepted until there is a statewide comprehensive magnet plan approved by the commissioner, unless he finds that such a school is necessary to comply with Sheff. Once again we would ask that "new" be defined to mean "new" and not include existing interdistrict magnet schools with approved operating plans that propose renovating their buildings, as opposed to building new ones.

We cannot do it alone and we have much more to do. On the operating side, cuts in various grants will set us back. We will have to cut summer school programs and paraprofessionals and teachers and many of our support systems. We would love a

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longer school day in some of our lowest performing schools – we cannot afford it now and will never be able to afford it with cuts in the general fund.

There is so much more we would like to do in every area, as we have so much work ahead of us. Strong leaders are needed at every school, and we must support the teachers in every classroom. Our assessments are helping, and so is professional development. We see more interventions as key tools to success, linked with our other efforts. Our families are increasingly stressed as the economic situation worsens, and people look to the schools to teach children and to provide activities, daytime into evening and throughout the year. Schools alone cannot provide all the answers but funding cuts make our job that much harder.

Education funding cuts often result in a disparate, negative impact on poorer urban school districts, while pressure continues on us to close the achievement gap. We want to continue to improve – dramatically so – and cannot do so without State support.

Thank you. We would be happy to answer any questions.

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## **Facts about New Haven Public Schools:**

- 20,000 students attend New Haven Public Schools; 1,987 of these students are from 30 towns; there are 17 interdistrict magnet schools, 4 intra-district magnets for New Haven students, and 3 lighthouse schools. A total of 7,325 students attend magnet schools in New Haven. We have nearly 7,000 applications for our magnet program; the lottery takes place this week.
- 23 of 31 schools are K-8 or pre-K-8. New Haven was #1 in its district reference group for the CMT in many areas, including math, reading and science. Grade to grade cohorts showed increases at every grade level in reading and math, and many schools had double digit gains.
- Nine schools made Safe Harbor; three of them were in Restructuring.
- We have a literacy and math coach in every school and they work with students and teachers in smaller group settings.
- Positive behavior support program is being piloted in five schools and the Comer School Reform model is being implemented in seven schools.
- Suspensions decreased by 1,228 students last year, the four-year dropout rate is 15.3% and school attendance is up.
- Curriculum is being strengthened as is work on effective use of instructional time.
- High schools posted the best gains in the district CAPT scores since the administration of CAPT began: 9% in reading and 11% in writing.
- Over 500 students took AP courses, with a 73% increase since 2003 for those scoring 3 or higher.
- There has been a 21 point increase in SAT scores since 2003. In 2008, 1,003 students graduated and 82.3% went on to 146 two- or four-year colleges. UCONN accepted 140 students.
- We have numerous partnerships with higher education institutions and others.
- New Haven is the largest school-based pre-school provider in the State and 79% of pre-school teachers have a 2-year college degree.
- The school construction program has resulted in 29 new and renovated schools opened since 1998 with five more in construction and four more in planning and design; they contribute to an improved learning environment, as noted in the Cambridge Report.
- State designation as the #1 Wellness Policy which reflects the Physical Activity and Wellness (PAW) programs (funded through private grants), and a variety of healthy education initiatives that are being employed across the District with our student population.
- Successful transition to in-house Food Service Program with dramatic transition in healthy menu choices for children, increased student participation and federal reimbursements and successful awards of numerous grants related to fresh fruits and vegetable and breakfast programs and recognitions for the efforts to increase healthy eating and awareness and decreasing obesity. Utilization of updated computerized systems to track purchasing and consumption which has served to more efficiently track costs and manage the system more effectively.